

NEW ZEALAND LISTENER

INCORPORATING N.Z. RADIO RECORD

Every Friday

Price Sixpence

AUGUST 31, 1956

Editorial and Business Offices: Hope Gibbons Building, Inglewood Place, Wellington, C.1.

P.O. Box 6098.

Telegraphic Address: "Listener," Wellington.

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Marbles Blindly Rolling

MONEY is so highly regarded in New Zealand that prizes won in lotteries are exempt from taxation, and the winners are interviewed, photographed, and held up to public gaze as persons of some importance. It is a strange attitude, not confined to New Zealand, but noticeable here because it consorts oddly with our national staidness. Other prizes, given as rewards for achievement in the arts and sciences, are not treated in quite the same way. Skill is taxable; and prizes for writers, painters or musicians are only moderately newsworthy. True, they receive more attention if the money reaches a respectable figure. The Jessie Mackay and Hubert Church Awards, the only literary prizes given annually in New Zealand, are worth no more than £25 each (they used to be about £7 until the Literary Fund helped out); and although their prestige is understood and valued by writers, they escape public notice. If the amount suddenly became £5000 (we are dreaming here, of course, simply dreaming), the awards would be headlined. And so also would be the outcry made promptly against a waste of money. Writing would again be put in its place as an activity which is supposed to be its own reward.

Lottery prizes have a beautiful simplicity. Where luck rules, there can be no argument about deserts, no criticism of judges or selectors, no appeal against a decision. All men are equal in status when the marbles begin to roll; they are troubled by no tiresome distinctions of ability or experience. The only requirement is ownership of a ticket which can be bought for a few shillings. And then, the result announced, how sudden and splendid is the transformation of the chosen few! To be lifted at once to affluence, to be applauded and admired (for in these matters it is virtuous to be lucky), is a dream lurking behind many thousands of faces that every morning may be seen placidly

scanning the newspapers. Human nature is protected from much evil, real and imaginary, by a powerful optimism. Bad things are hustled out of consciousness: "It can't happen here, or to me," is a familiar incantation. But good things are kept clearly in focus; and what could be better than money? The new house, the motor car, the voyage in a luxury liner, the fabulous wardrobe: these and a hundred other possibilities are flitting through hopeful minds when a lottery is imminent. They are not crushed by failure. All that is needed to recapture the golden reverie is another ticket. And in the meantime, as someone else wins thousands of pounds, there is the vicarious pleasure of identification. The pleased and slightly rugged New Zealand face, shining from a photograph, the interview and the modest composure ("We have not yet decided how the money will be spent"), are all reminders that this could happen to anyone. Can it be surprising if even the tax-gatherers, dead in pursuit of all other gains, draw back from a prize which glitters for Everyman?

It would be kinder, perhaps, to leave the dream undisturbed. Yet a man who wants to be happy, and who has never been able to decide what happiness really is, would be wise to hope that the luck he waits for will bring him no more than a minor prize. A great sum of money will change a life, and nobody knows what the change will be. Luck may be blind, but so is the lightning. Chance ends and responsibility begins when the riches have been won; and the use of responsibility is not within the gift of a lottery. A thousand parables have urged this truth. To be fortunate, but not too fortunate, is the plea men should make if they are looking for gifts. Best of all, is to look for nothing except what can be earned. For the gods of chance, blind though they may be (or perhaps because they are blind) exact full payment for their favours, and are not interested in money.

N.Z. LISTENER, AUGUST 31, 1956.